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The Cleveland Museum of Natural History

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PRESENTATION OF THE DAVID S. INGALLS, JR. AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE*

PRESENTATION OF THE AWARD

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Roger Tory Peterson, on behalf of the Board of Trustees of The Cleveland Museum of Natural History, it is indeed a privilege to have you with us tonight. I have the singular honor of introducing you as this year's recipient of the David S. Ingalls, Jr. Award for Excellence.

The Museum's and Dr. Peterson's relationship goes back many, many years, at least 63 years, and we can document this. You will find on exhibit outside the auditorium correspondence from the early 1930s between Roger Tory Peterson and Dr. Oberholser and John Aldrich—both Museum staff members—with regard to an opening in the bird department for which Roger Tory Peterson was considering applying. Noting the year, 1931, and the economic climate—depression—I'm sure an opening-level position salary would not have been very attractive, but the mutual respect between our award recipient and these two men is obvious in the letters.

I would like to quote a sentence in one of his letters from Camp Chewonki, Wiscasset, Maine, to Dr. Oberholser, dated August 12, 1931: "I am an art student at present and it is my hope to give the others of this rising group of young bird artists a run for their money."

In 1940 Dr. Peterson provided all the illustrations for The Cleveland Museum of Natural History publication, *A Field Key to Our Common Birds,* written by Irene Rorimer. Dr. Peterson created 44 tempera drawings and 35 ink drawings for the booklet. This artwork, a part of the Museum's fine arts collection, is also hung outside this auditorium.

In 1981 the Museum hosted "Bird Art," a juried exhibition sponsored by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum of Wausau, Wisconsin. Roger Tory Peterson was the honored guest and program speaker at the opening. Over 850 people crowded the auditorium to hear him. Dr. Peterson's fourth edition of his *Field Guide to the Birds* had come out in 1980, and he graciously consented to a reception and book-signing following the program. Many of us here tonight remember queuing up to collect his autograph in the new fourth edition as well as in older copies. Frannie Newell, a Museum volunteer, had him sign her mother's copy of the first edition that had been Frannie's bird primer as a child.

The following morning Dr. Peterson met with the Future Scientists and the exchange was so exhilarating and stimulating for all participants, it was very hard to pry him away. I feel it's safe to say that motivating a

*On May 20, 1994, the David S. Ingalls, Jr. Award for Excellence was presented to Roger Tory Peterson. The text of Mary Lou Ferbert's speech on that occasion is printed here in a slightly shortened version. Roger Tory Peterson's remarks are excerpted, with his permission, from more extensive notes used during his acceptance speech.

group of kids provides him as much enjoyment as any of his mega-accomplishments.

And, continuing our relationship with this gifted man, tonight he is again with us and he is about to receive the David S. Ingalls, Jr. Award for Excellence. Our award recipient was born in Jamestown, New York. When he was eleven he came upon a flicker asleep on a tree trunk. He assumed it was dead. Being inquisitive, he investigated. Then he witnessed it suddenly burst into life and fly off. It was a magical, mystifying experience. It triggered a life's journey.

While still a teenager, he dazzled the elder naturalists with his broad knowledge of natural history gained through direct field experience and study. His academic training was in painting, five years at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design in New York. Of course, during his New York tenure he was an eager visitor to the American Museum of Natural History where he could compare and contrast beaks and feet and plumage to his heart's content.

As a young man he spent several years teaching natural science at summer camps in Maine. At Rivers Country Day School in Brookline, Massachusetts, he taught art and science. While teaching there William Vogt, the first editor of Audubon magazine, persuaded him to write and illustrate a pocket-sized guide for bird watchers. Four publishers rejected the manuscript, but Houghton Mifflin printed a conservative 2,000 copies of *A Field Guide to the Birds* in 1934. It sold out within a week. A career was launched and he became a legend in his field overnight.

Dr. Peterson's matchless paintings, combined with the Peterson identification system, revolutionized and simplified field observation, giving the layperson the opportunity to become adept at identifying birds in a much shorter period of time—a few years as opposed to a lifetime. Sixty years and over five million copies later, it is still the standard against which all other field guides are measured. I would venture to say, it's a staple in home libraries. How many people in the audience own at least one Peterson field guide?

It is impossible to list all of his accomplishments. The field guide series now includes more than 60 titles. In addition to acting as editor of this series, Roger Tory Peterson has written, illustrated, and edited over 15 other books, many of which have sold millions of copies. And they have been translated into as many as 12 languages. His original paintings and limited edition prints have appeared in over 50 private exhibitions and public museums around the country. In April 1984 the Smithsonian Institution mounted an exhibit of Peterson's paintings in honor of the 50th anniversary of *A Field Guide to the Birds*.

I would like to read a portion of the remarks by S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, on that occasion: "Roger Tory Peterson — more than any other person of our time — you epitomize the field naturalist in the public mind. With genius and simplicity, talent and dedication, you persisted in an idea and fashioned a small book that became a giant and a first in its class. Overnight, *A Field Guide to the Birds* revolutionized the field...."

Museum Director Dr. J. Mary Taylor and Roger Tory Peterson, May 20, 1994.

Dr. Peterson is the recipient of 22 honorary degrees from American universities in the diverse disciplines of art, science, humanities, and letters. President Carter bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom on him in 1980. This medal is the highest honor a civilian can be awarded in the United States. Time does not permit me to list his many other awards.

Roger Tory Peterson, you are teacher, artist, ornithologist, author, editor, field naturalist, conservationist, environmentalist, photographer, cinematographer, and lecturer. You are a national treasure. Inveterate traveler would also describe you. You have seen more than 5,000 birds, over half the world's species, and you are still going! In 1992 you, with your wife Ginny, completed your 18th trip to Antarctica. You have observed and photographed birds on every continent, and you have photographed all species of flamingos and penguins in their natural habitats, a unique accomplishment. Your abiding love for photography is less well-known and overshadowed by your painting reputation, but photography is a significant part of your oeuvre.

In the 1970s when our honored guest was approaching his 70s, with *many* lifetimes of productive work to his credit, Dr. Peterson embarked on a new project, the Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History, in Jamestown, New York. In August of last year, this dream became a reality as the new Roger Tory Peterson Institute building was dedicated.

Dr. Peterson spawned a national pastime. He has led tens of millions of people outdoors with the Peterson field guides in their pockets to experience the natural world. I think all of us contemplate immortality. You, sir, have achieved it through your gift to humankind. We thank you.

REPLY

ROGER TORY PETERSON
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Ladies and gentlemen, members and friends of The Cleveland Museum, it is a moving experience to be with you today and to receive the David S. Ingalls, Jr. Award. Over the years I have enjoyed my many contacts with the birders in and around the Cleveland area. Many of them are no longer with us. Recently a young person asked me if I ever knew Audubon. "Good heavens," I replied, "I am not that old."

Birds, the most beautiful, the most dynamic and most observable of all wild things, have been the focus of my life since I was a boy of eleven. For more than 70 years they have occupied my daily thoughts, filled my dreams, and dominated my reading. But what, you may wonder, happened when I was eleven that changed me from a rebellious youngster to an obsessed bird watcher?

It was because of a teacher I had in the seventh grade. Miss Hornbeck, a red-haired lady about 30 years old, organized a junior Audubon Club, and we each received ten leaflets about birds, each with a color plate of the bird and an outline drawing to color. But coloring in the outlines was not much of an artistic challenge, so Miss Hornbeck provided each of us with a little box of watercolors and a brush and had us copy from color plates by Fuertes. She gave me the blue jay to copy. I thought I did OK, but when our drawings were put up on the blackboard she credited my blue jay to Edith, the girl who sat across the aisle. I was very upset. Realizing her mistake, Miss Hornbeck soon put things straight. I have often wondered what became of Edith.

Because the blue jay was my first attempt at bird drawing, the blue jay remains one of my favorites. But the incident that really hooked me on birds for life took place the following weekend. It was a Saturday in April, 1920, 70 years ago. A classmate, Carl Hammerstrom, who lived up the street, and I crossed the railroad tracks and climbed Swede Hill to explore new territory. As we entered a grove near the crest of the hill we spotted a bundle of brown feathers clinging to the trunk of a tree. It was a flicker, asleep, with its bill and face tucked under the feathers of its back. It was probably resting from migration, but I thought it was dead. I touched it on the back, and instantly this inert bundle of feathers sprang to life, looked to me with wild eyes, then dashed away in a flash of gold. It was like resurrection. What had seemed dead was very much alive. Ever since then, birds have seemed to me to be the most vivid expression of life.

I like to think of my own contribution to the conservation-environmental movement as one of interpreter and opinion-maker through my writing and my painting. It started with my field guides—a visual system—putting names to things—employing shape, patterns, and field marks. My field guides were a useful invention, but to do their job the drawings are rather formal and schematic, a different "art form," if you will. To have done them otherwise would have compromised the purpose for which they were intended—simplification—a short cut to field identification so that a person might soon have some competence and then go on to behavior, ecology, artistic portrayal, environmental activism, or whatever. The "Peterson system," as my method has been called, is a visual one consistent with field birding. The system is based on patternistic drawings with arrows that pinpoint field marks as seen at a distance. These rather formal illustrations and the direct comparisons between similar-looking species are the core of the system, unlike the more traditional bird portraiture found in most other bird books. However, I leaned a bit more toward portraiture in the fourth edition while trying not to lose the basic abstraction.…

My wife Ginny and I are still working on the new eastern field guide. (It will be the 6th edition.) She is working on the maps and I still have a few color plates to work on; then I will be back to my real painting. The recent things that I have done as limited edition prints (for Mill Pond Press) are a transition stage—most of them fall into the category of decorative portraiture, delineation in the Audubon tradition. Now I intend to paint more expansively—to get back into oils and canvas again, to play with mood and color and light. To paint more sensuously, the kind of painting for which I was originally trained at the Art Students League and the National Academy under such Masters as Kimon Nikolaides, John Sloan, and Vincent Dumond, Raymond D. Neilson and Edmund Dickinson. That was good training because wildlife painting cannot go too far from realism without risking affectation. Now I intend to indulge myself and return to a more painterly kind of painting—living birds with three-dimensional activity, movement in space, and, of course, with some biological comment.…

Thank you very much.